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Philly centralizes admissions process for magnet schools to increase student diversity

By [Mallory Falk](#) • October 6, 2021

 The School District of Philadelphia is changing its admissions system to increase diversity at magnet schools. (Johnny Perez-Gonzalez/WHYY)

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The School District of Philadelphia is changing its admissions system for selective middle and high schools in an effort to make the process more equitable. Traditionally, these schools have served a lesser share of Black and Latino students compared to the district as a whole.

Students will now apply for selective schools through a citywide, computerized lottery system overseen by central office staffers. In the past, school leaders made final admissions decisions and oversaw waitlists.

"There is a need to centralize the selection process as a way to help us dig deeper and to continue to grapple with the tension between objectivity and subjectivity in our process, as well as a way to really think about how do we build consistency so we see the equitable outcomes we desire," said Sabriya Jubilee, the district's director of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The district is also implementing a zip code preference "for students that meet the [admissions] criteria and live in areas of the city that traditionally have had limited access to criteria-based schools," said Karyn Lynch, director of student support services for the district.

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Students from under-represented zip codes will receive preference at five specific schools: Masterman, Central, Academy at Palumbo, Carver High School of Engineering and Science, and Parkway Center City Middle College.

"It is our hope that implementation of the zip code preference will provide additional opportunities for our most underrepresented communities," said Darnell Deans, the district's executive director of student enrollment and placement.

The Philadelphia Board of Education's "goals and guardrails" initiative includes increasing representation of Black and Latino students at highly-ranked magnet schools as part of a broader effort to "dismantle racist practices."

According to district data, Black student enrollment has been decreasing at the highly-selective schools. In 2011-2012, Black students made up 31% of the student body at Masterman and 33% at Central. By 2019-2020, those numbers had dipped to 15% and 20%, respectively, Chalkbeat reported.

Officials previously announced they would temporarily stop using standardized test scores to determine admission after the coronavirus pandemic halted state tests.

"This data point was eliminated this year, and we are giving great consideration to what will happen in future years," Lynch said.

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In addition to implementing a lottery system and zip code preferences, the district will no longer require interviews or letters of recommendation for selective admissions schools.

The district is also changing the language it uses to describe these "special admit" schools.

The changes came after the district sought guidance from students, parents, school administrators, and central office staff.

Stephanie King is a parent of two public school students, including one who spent a year at Masterman. During that time, she served on the school's diversity committee.

"I think that it is definitely a huge step in the right direction in sort of acknowledging the problem and trying to take corrective measures," said King, who's white. "I'm pleased and impressed that it does as much as it does."

But she also expressed concern about focusing on students' zip codes as a way to ensure the admissions process becomes more equitable and schools become more diverse.

"Within a zip code, you still have more privileged people gaming the system by using private schools or transferring into a different public school that has higher scores or more favorable demographics," she said. Those children then have a step up qualifying for and gaining admissions to selective schools.

King lives in Northern Liberties and said many white middle class families opt out of the assigned neighborhood school there. The district, she says, is "using zip code as a proxy for something that it's not."

And, she said, while a lottery system is also an important step toward fairness, "you haven't fixed the circumstances that are making some neighborhood schools produce more qualified applicants than others."

Masterman's new principal, Jeannine Hendricks Payne, said she was still processing the changes. She is only weeks into her tenure as the school's leader.

But she acknowledged that not all students have the same access to selective schools.

"I'm familiar, from having worked in a K-8 school and worked in a K-5 school, of the kind of conditions that we tried to make available for our students so that they could come to Masterman if they wanted. But I also know that that is not the ability of every school and every student. And inherently we know that that is unfair," she said. "If we know that there are practices and things that prevent fairness and equity, I think we owe it to ourselves to explore those possibilities."

At a press conference announcing the revamped admissions process, Jubilee said the district will look into feeder patterns and address the fact that some schools send a disproportionate number of students to magnets.

"We are looking to one, identify where those patterns exist and how they came to be and then utilize that as a way to figure out where we need to think about change," she said, adding that the district is also working to ensure that more students have access to the types of enrichment and tutoring opportunities that will help them qualify for and succeed in selective schools.

The district is aware that some parents and families may push back against the changes — something that happened when school officials proposed a centralized lottery system and geographic and diversity weights in 2010. Then-superintendent Arlene Ackerman ultimately

scrapped the proposal. News reports from the time highlighted complaints from mostly white, middle class parents who opposed a move that could make it harder for their children to attend the city's most coveted schools.

"As a district, we have made a commitment to being an anti-racist organization," Jubilee said. "We recognize that there will be people who are uncomfortable, but we're leaning into that discomfort, and we're going to do what we need to do to do right by our students."

The school selection window for the 2022-2023 school year opens Wednesday afternoon and closes November 21.



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